

Grace Presbyterian Church, Orleans
“Commencement of the Core Mission”
Matthew 3: 13-17; Acts 10: 34 - 43
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Epiphany II

Beginnings are important. How you begin your day is critical to your day. If you start it without hope and without focus, that will shape your day, won't it? What do you do to start your day right?

That's why if you are starting to read the Scriptures from Genesis, it is critical to your understanding of the Bible: that God is, that God creates, that God makes us and this life and planet in His image and for His ends and mission. His love pursues us, even as we reject Him. He does not give up on us easily.

Beginnings are critical. Sin happening early in our human history means we are marked by such rebellion to God and all of human history is marked with such a rebellion. Scripture seems to indicate that God's Old Covenant mission believed we could choose rightly before God and choose God over idols. God's Old Covenant gave birth to the New Covenant where God Himself comes, in Jesus.

This New Covenant in Jesus is a new beginning. The mission is re-started as never before in God's human presence in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We celebrate the beginning of that mission with the Virgin Birth and the protection of the child Jesus of Mary with Matthew and Luke. All Gospel writers begin Jesus' ministry with His baptism. We know this involves more than Jesus in this beginning of another beginning. It involves John the Baptizer. John is fulfilling the prophetic role of introducing the Messiah to the people of Israel. It is a huge role. John does it well, even if he does have doubts later in prison. Jesus approaches John in Matthew 3: 13-17. It is a short passage, but it tells us a lot.

Did you notice the first thing it tells us besides the fact that Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized?

John didn't want to baptize Jesus. Why? Why didn't John want to baptize Jesus? Wasn't that the whole point of starting Jesus ministry in line with

John's? Wasn't that the divine plan from the beginning? So why wouldn't John agree at the earliest time to baptize Jesus?

The answer is that John knew the people were coming to repent of their sins. Jesus was not coming to do that. He was leading a life in obedience to God and did not have sins to confess and repent of. John acknowledges the character of Jesus. John is clear when he says he should be baptized by Jesus, not the other way around. In the Gospel of John 3:30, there a whole section on John knowing that he must decrease in ministry, and Jesus must increase.

Here it is here in Matthew. John is bowing to Jesus appropriately. He really doesn't understand why the Lord wants to be baptized. He does understand and bows to his desire to be baptized. What reason does Jesus give? "To fulfill all righteousness." This is the core commencement of God's mission by his own hand, in person. Unlike the Pharisees and other religious leaders who simply watch, Jesus identifies and agrees with John's mission. He personally submits to the confession of sins, as a great high priest does, in offering a sacrifice on behalf of the whole nation. Jesus is offering Himself on behalf of the whole nation. The high priest Caiaphas who does not even believe in Jesus would later prophesy this. (John 11:50)

So John baptizes Jesus, and a supernatural event takes place. Heaven is opened. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove. A voice from Heaven is heard: "This is my Son whom I love. I am well pleased with Him." And Luke adds (9:35) "Listen to Him."

The core relationship of Jesus to the Heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit is displayed as the centre of His mission on earth. Love supports Jesus through all He will go through, from acclamation and victory to slow torture and premature death. The pleasure of the Father is on Jesus. Do you know the Father's love and pleasure in your life?

Do you feel and acknowledge your unique gifting to the mission of Jesus? "You are my beloved Son, my beloved Daughter." Hear this as you re-start your Christian mission in 2020. Hear anew the pleasure of the Father on your life. Hear how much he loves your unique contribution to the spreading of His love on this planet, the spreading of His truth on this planet.

Even as we hear Jesus' mission begin, we must hear our own. And we must listen to Him, listen to Jesus to get that right. I can't tell you your unique part in the kingdom of God. I can tell you that it is right to worship Him, to read His Word, to celebrate His goodness and gifts in our midst. These are essential features to the core commencement and recommencement of His mission here in Orleans and beyond.

Jesus knows, even as He knew in the water that a huge mission was starting that would reshape the earth. He knew the small things He was agreeing to do would shape the lives of billions. Do we know our force and impact in his name? Our influence, which is His influence?

Jesus also knew that what he was doing at His baptism was for more than the nation of Israel. It was for the whole world. How do we know this?

We know it through Peter's preaching in Acts, chapter 10. Peter who had started to agree with the Judaizers who believed that the Gospel was essentially Jewish and that Gentiles had to adopt Old Testament law in all its forms to be saved, to be true Christians. Peter was being swayed by those who took this position until God gave him a vision of something new. He was in Cornelius the Centurion's house, which in itself was a violation of the Jewish law, and baptized Cornelius and his household. (Acts 10:48) This was something that Peter had been discouraged from doing. But now God was encouraging Peter and the whole church to accept Gentiles as they are, and lead them into relationship with Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, just as Jewish believers were into relationship with Jesus.

So now even Peter was saying that God shows no favoritism but accepts us as we accept Him. The Gospel intended for the people of Israel to repent from their sins, making a U turn in Jesus direction, is not just for Israel but every nation and every individual.

The good news is Jesus is Lord of all. God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power, doing good and healing, releasing all under the power of the devil. Peter says he witnessed this in Israel and Jerusalem. Peter says this same people he taught crucified Him, but God raised Him from the dead. He was seen by many alive and He ate and drank with several of his followers. So now Peter and Jesus' followers proclaim Him as the judge of the living and the dead. That everyone who believes and trusts in Him receives the forgiveness of sins through Jesus' name.

The Gentiles who heard this received this as true and the Holy Spirit was poured out on them, just as the Jewish disciples of Jesus had experienced. Speaking in tongues was the initial evidence, something that Paul made clear later was a spiritual gift that not everyone received. But here they were, Peter and other church leaders, were seeing God working in the very occupational force that had been cruelly oppressing the Jewish people.

It blew their minds. So now we know the mission is not just a mission of reconciling the Jewish people with God, but everyone with God through Jesus Christ. What is your role in that ongoing mission? How are we to start or restart that mission here in 2020?

Seven Take-aways:

- 1) **Knowing First the One who leads the Mission.** Recommitting ourselves to Jesus Christ, body, soul and spirit. Without this relationship first, nothing else makes sense.
- 2) **Listening to Him.** The heavenly voice recorded in Luke 9 is a summary of many other Scriptures which encourage us to hear the voice of Jesus in Scripture. What plans do you have to read Scripture to listen to Jesus? Are you following those plans?
- 3) **Following Him and His Word no matter what it costs us.** Once we understand and hear the voice of Jesus, we make that a priority in our lives, and our allegiance to Him takes first place in our lives. Where have I betrayed Jesus? Where have I compromised my relationship with Him? What am I willing to do to make that right?
- 4) **Being able more naturally to share our relationship with Jesus with others.** 2020 is the year to make sure you know why you continue to follow Jesus. If you are not able to tell your story of how you met Him and how He met you, then make sure you write it down, and rehearse saying it to yourself before Him, so that you can say it to others, with full confidence in Jesus. This is key to sharing your faith.
- 5) **Actually doing so.** Take the time to share this first with those closest to you, then with others. I would listen, if you feel can find no others.
- 6) **Affirming in others what God is doing.** What of the most beautiful things in the movie *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* is the way Mr. Rogers is able to see how God was moving in someone and through someone who could not see it themselves. He was unexpectedly grateful for difficult questions and challenges. We can learn from him.

7) Continuing to participate in what God is doing here. We can determine in our hearts to want add positively to what this congregation is doing in our city and in our neighborhood. Some see church as a presentation, or performance. We trust you know that your part counts here, and not just mine or those who are regularly at the front.

Consider these points as suggestion for New Year's actions. I trust you will ask the Lord about each of these for your life.

The commencement of the mission is not just the historical mission of Jesus when He was on the earth. It is also our own lives today.

We trust you are trusting God for what He wants to do through you.

Let us pray.